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Colours, not visions: On preserving authenticity in the New Psychedelic Movement

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The New Psychedelic Movement is not a "psychedelic Renaissance". It is the re-emergence of a Renaissance that began in the 1930s, with Richard Evans Schultes' ethnobotanical research, and culminated into a counterculture youth movement in the 1960s. While research around these substances is little more than a century old, the practices of using them, as performed by Indigenous peoples, date to prehistoric times [1]. These ancient practices stem from cultural contexts often disregarded by current research and contemporary practices. This brings to light a serious concern: that the focus of psychedelic inquiry is shifting toward commodification of the substances and the practices associated with them. In so doing, we are losing the authenticity of meaningful psychedelic use by transforming psychedelics and psychedelic practices into commodified pharmacological solutions to our current problems.

This essay, then, will attempt to address this issue. We will first contextualise the discussion by outlining a brief history of psychedelics. We will describe the current state of the psychedelic resurgence and compare it to the resurgence that occurred in the 1950s-60s. This will allow us to examine the loss of authenticity of psychedelic practices and show why this is an important contemporary issue. Finally, we will discuss possible solutions that may help preserve authenticity in the current movement.

A brief history of psychedelics

Psychedelic substances have been used by cultures worldwide for thousands of years [2]. Early explorers and field researchers of the Americas, such as Sahagún, documented indigenous use of psychedelics in colonial encounters from the 1500s to 1800s. In the 1930s, American ethnographers and botanists researched plants used by indigenous peoples of the continent [1]. Schultes, for example, led expeditions in the Amazon, and Weston La Barre studied the origins of the peyote religion among Native peoples in the Plains.

Meanwhile, Albert Hofmann discovered

LSD while studying the chemical structure of ergot, a group of fungi.

By the 1950s and early 1960s the interest in psychedelics had spread beyond purely scientific circles, and intellectuals were discussing the potential effects of psychedelics on consciousness. Aldous Huxley and Alan Watts both wrote extensively on their own experiences [3, 5]. At the same time, and throughout the 1960s, the CIA was investigating LSD as a "mind control" drug in a series of illegal experiments that formed the MKUltra program. Some psychedelics were picked up by the Beat writers, who had a strong influence on the student generation in the 1960s.

While teaching at Harvard in the early 1960s, Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert and Ralph Metzner conducted experiments in psychology using psychedelics, and these were quickly adopted by the student generation [8]. Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters also helped popularise psychedelic use, by bridging the gap between the Beat writers and the younger members of the counterculture movement.

After his dismissal from Harvard, Leary, with Kesey, became a figurehead for the movement and continued to write about psychedelics throughout the 1970s. Prohibition of most psychedelic substances prevented research until the 1990s, when a renewed interest in psychedelic science began in the Western world [8].

Comparison of current and 1960s approaches

The current resurgence of interest in psychedelics seems to focus on their therapeutic potential. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the ongoing discourse around the importance of mental health. Much of the research revolves around the potential benefits that psychedelics may bring in understanding the brain and brain disorders.

Overall, information about psychedelics is easy to access in the age of instant communication. Perhaps because of this, popular interest has grown, and psychedelic integration (the process of applying insights from psychedelic experiences to day-to-day experience) is quickly becoming a buzz word, to the point that its importance might be lost. Commercialisation of psychedelic practises has started: vision quests, retreats and therapies are already being marketed to Westerners eager to experience altered states legitimately [9]. Furthermore, derivatives of some psychedelics are currently under review for medical uses. Ketamine, for example, is available in Canada in clinical settings. Ketamine-assisted therapy is a reality, with private clinics operating in major cities [10]. Various U.S. states have decriminalised, to some extent, psilocybin mushrooms. Finally, with instant communication come increased cultural exchanges, and indigenous populations are less isolated now than they have been

historically. While we will see that this may lead to a possible distortion of how a culture is represented, it is important to note that it has also become easier to learn from different cultures through increased intercultural exchanges.

In contrast, the popular literature of the 1960s movement highlights the importance of meaningful psychedelic experiences, through combined artistic points of view, ethnographic studies, psychological studies, philosophical inquiry or articles detailing suggestions for psychedelic sessions (without tedious legal disclaimers). Importantly, there is no "commercial hype", or, indeed, a unified narrative like there is today in discussions about psychedelics. Instead, the multiplicity of views suggests that the focus of the movement was to find genuine meaning – at a time when the US was reckoning with racial tensions and fighting a losing war in Vietnam. The Psychedelic Review [11] is a fine example of a multidisciplinary publication that sought to advance meaningful discussion about psychedelics. While the multidisciplinary conferences of today (Breaking Convention, Psychedelic Science) arguably have similar goals, the impact that multifaceted discussion has on popular perception of psychedelics is less clear. It seems that the current narrative champions a utilitarian view of psychedelics, eg. "In what ways can we use them?", rather than the exploratory views dominant in the 1960s counterculture movement ("What can we learn from them?"). The utilitarian view foreshadows exploitative or profit-driven use of psychedelics, which we will later see undermines authenticity. The exploratory views dominant in the 1960s counterculture, in contrast, suggest a desire to create meaning out of what we have yet to learn about psychedelics and related practices. We will see that it is this attribution of meaning that makes a practice authentic.

Defining authenticity

An "authentic" practice can be defined as an accurate instance of the practice. Authenticity, for a substance, comes from the meaning attributed to it and to the practices that surround its use. Indeed, attributing meaning to a practice gives a reason for it to be performed. A culture that combines both a practice done a certain way and the reason it is performed creates something unique to that culture. If something is unique to a culture, then it is authentic, it is "the real thing".

Meaning forms the basis of different cultures' spiritual beliefs as well as

1: It is problematic to claim that cultures, rather than representations, get "distorted", when all cultures adapt over time as they interact with other cultures. Here we are simply stating that when there is change, some cultural elements may be lost. In the same sense, we are considering the loss of cultural elements as a negative consequence of adaptation; this is by no means the only view to take.

relating to people's general well-being. Losing authenticity, then, is a concern because it removes meaning, both an individual's applied meaning and meaning that cultures give to their practices. We will first show that wrongful cultural appropriation is unethical and leads to loss of authenticity. Then, we will discuss why commercialisation and commodification of psychedelic substances and practices result in loss of meaning.

Authenticity and wrongful cultural appropriation

Cultural appropriation can be considered wrongful when harm to a culture or unacceptable offence to a person or group occurs. The authors of [7] consider three ways in which cultural appropriation of beliefs and practices is unethical: when there is a threat to a culture's identity by misrepresentation, when the appropriation constitutes cultural theft, and when there is unacceptable offence to a culture. Adding to these reasons, we will see that disregard for context when practicing psychedelic rituals also undermines the authenticity of the practice.

Representation of a culture occurs when outsiders publicly speak about a culture, or engage in a culture's practices, in the name of this culture. For example, an academic considered an expert on a culture may represent it by publicly stating that this culture believes in X. Representation is not an issue as long as it is made clear that what is being represented by an outsider is different than the authentic cultural practice. This brings us to misrepresentation. When cultural practices are presented as authentic when they are not, there is misrepresentation. Brunk and Young describe this issue in [7]:

It is one thing to adopt a belief about the sacredness of the natural environment inspired by a particular Aboriginal world views, or to adopt a 'sweat lodge' practice as a spiritual ceremony. This in itself does not pose a threat of misrepresentation of the appropriated culture. However, when the belief or practice is publicly represented as 'Ogalala Sioux' or 'Haida', it may well pose this threat.

We can apply the same reasoning to psychedelic rituals. For example, a "New Age vision quest" is authentic only if it represents the New Age culture, a Kiowa vision quest must be done according to Kiowa customs, usually by and for members of that culture, and a vision quest inspired by a specific tribe is an ethical way of referring to a

2: It can be argued, however, that authenticity is a Western cultural concept that does not necessarily originate from cultures other than Western ones. R. Handler discusses this, and its implications, in [12].

3: Offences will, of course, be tolerated differently by different individuals or groups. By "unacceptable offense" we are referring to the "profound offence" described in [7].

Western ritual with some indigenous practices added to it. This last statement avoids representation of a culture while acknowledging the influence the culture has on the new practice.
Participation in an "ayahuasca vision quest" or an "ayahuasca ceremony", however, is an ambiguous statement: while it does not explicitly represent a specific Indigenous tribe, it does evoke some distorted, generalised image of an indigenous ceremony, without attributing the practice to a specific culture. It may well refer to a group of urbanites going to a countryside cottage to conduct a non-religious ceremony with rituals meaningful only to them. In this last case, there is no threat of misrepresentation at all: indeed, the ritual clearly has nothing to do with any indigenous culture. Despite this, if it were to refer to an Indigenous-inspired practice, then it would be inauthentic. It must also be stressed that "vision quest" is a term referring to the rite-of-passage rituals of Native American Plains tribes, and that its meaning is often taken broadly as any spiritual rite-of-passage ritual [6]. This brings us to the next point: that generalisation of cultural views may pose a threat to cultural identity.
Misrepresentation of a culture constitutes a threat to cultural identity when an outsider's view of a culture becomes generalised. The above example illustrates this point: the term "vision quest" is no longer associated exclusively with Native American cultural practices, much less with specific tribes. As such, terms that once referred to specific cultural practices take on broader meanings that do not directly evoke specific cultures. If the cultural practices form a part of a culture's identity, and they are then lost to generalisation, then there is a threat to the culture's identity. Furthermore, when a culture is represented inaccurately, members of the culture may internalise the inaccurate, often dominant view of outsiders to their culture, leading to a dilution of their culture. The Church's work to assimilate Indigenous peoples throughout Canada is a historical example of this. Note that these harms do not relate solely to psychedelic practices,

Misrepresentation of a culture constitutes a threat to cultural identity when an outsider's view of a culture becomes generalised.

but are part of a larger discussion about cultural interactions.
Cultural theft is another unethical harm that Brunk and Young discuss in their chapter. The authors show that Indigenous claims of ownership and right to exclusive use on their practices fit with the Western concept of copyright. This is because a culture, by its specific way of expressing a religious/spiritual belief, brings an "added value" to the belief which the culture has a right of exclusive use to. Much like how an artistic

work can be inspired by another artist, and the new artist's work protected by copyright, a culture creates something new by expressing its beliefs in a certain way. This "certain way" is considered "copyrightable". Another ethical concern with losing authenticity is that it can cause unacceptable offense to members of a culture. Brunk and Young cite "religious expression torn from cultural context" as a form of unacceptable offense. Similarly, commercialisation of beliefs and practices, as well as misrepresentation, can cause unacceptable offense. (Commercialisation will be discussed later.) Much like misrepresentation, disregard for context contributes to loss of authenticity and may cause unacceptable offense. Indeed, the cultural context of a practice creates meaning for those performing it; this is certainly applicable to the psychedelic experience. Hence, disregard for the cultural context in which a substance is used, or from which a practice originates, takes away this meaning, thus undermining authenticity. Here we must distinguish between psychedelic substances, both naturally occurring and synthesized, and psychedelic practices. Whether harm occurs depends on where the wrongful appropriation happens (substance or practice), and whether there is a cultural context to consider.

Blanket appropriation of psychedelic rituals has already occurred, for example during the 1960s resurgence. Weston La Barre warned of the misappropriation of psychedelic rituals in 1975, in the introduction to the second edition of his monograph, The Peyote Cult [4]. Comparing the Native American Church (an Indigenous religion which combines Christian elements, Native American beliefs and the ceremonial use of peyote, and the Neo-American Church, a group led by Timothy Leary which promoted "consciousness expansion" using practices similar to those of the NAC, he writes:

Thus I defend the Native American Church among Amerindian aborigines; but I deplore the "Neo-American Church" among Caucasoid Americans who pretend to follow their "religion" through the use of mescaline as a "sacrament." Ethnographically the latter is a wholly synthetic, disingenuous and bogus cult, [...] indeed, to it could properly be applied the old missionary cliché against peyotism as the "use of drugs under religious guise."

Here, disregard for the original cultural context creates an appropriated practice devoid of meaning.
We could argue that Huxley's use of synthesized mescaline in The Doors of Perception constitutes a novel psychedelic practice, as he does not attempt to reproduce one of the traditional peyote rituals that La Barre describes. We should, however, question his respect for the substance, since, as La Barre notes, he persists on referring to peyote by an incorrect name [see 4, p228]. The ethics of practices using substances that occur naturally, compared to synthetic, or

synthesized ones, is a topic beyond the scope of the present essay.
One might also argue that psychedelics have become part of Western "culture" in the last few years, and that the current scientific research creates a new culture altogether. If these last statements stand, then they must be heavily nuanced. First, Western psychedelia seems restricted to those educated, and wealthy enough, to have the time and inclination to explore it. For example, the 2022 Crime Survey for England and Wales [13] shows that people from households in higher income groups are more likely to use class A drugs, of which psychedelics are a part, than people from households in lower income groups. It is not a far leap to deduce that most people who use psychedelics are financially comfortable.

A "Western culture" is by no means limited to this subgroup. If "the West" is to be regarded as a very large, uniform social group, then Western psychedelia is not at all representative of Western cultural practices. In other words, Western psychedelia does not yet belong to all Westerners. Second, to call a 5- or 50-year-old movement a culture might be an incorrect use of the term, when we have so far considered indigenous peoples who have cultures that are thousands of years old. Hence, it may be best, for the moment, to refer to Western psychedelia as a trend.

Commercialisation and commodification

Authenticity of a psychedelic experience comes from the meaning it brings.
We will see in the following that commercialisation and commodification take away that meaning.
There have been instances of commercialisation of psychedelic substances before the current resurgence. For example, in 1959 in France, "Peyotyl R.D." was being advertised as a cure-all medication. Owsley Stanley promoting the LSD he synthesized in the 1960s, using paper artwork or gaining exposure via the Merry Pranksters, resembles marketing. Schultes comments that "It is interesting here to note that when problems do arise from the employment of narcotics, they arise after the narcotics have passed from ceremonial to purely hedonic or recreational use." (see 4, p225) The problems that Schultes describes are mainly societal issues that perhaps cannot be dealt with only in the discussion of psychedelics.
Currently in the Netherlands, some psychedelics are legally sold in shops that will hand out information leaflets about the substances they sell. These leaflets, although a first step to educating the public about psychedelics, lack the depth

4: Here "the West" refers broadly to Europe, North America and Australia. Even if, instead, we consider the Western world as the patchwork of cultures it more realistically is, then Western psychedelia still does not have the reach that a culture would have.

of information one would be expected to know to fully respect the non-Western cultures that use psychedelic substances. Without a cultural framework to place the practices in, experiences may lack meaning. In other words, few people will actively do their own research into the origins of the substances they use. It is this mindset that must be addressed in the current resurgence of the movement. Furthermore, the current "hype" for psychedelics masks the meaningful reasons to legalise them. We have previously stated that the emerging discussions around the importance of mental health have legitimised legalisation in the eyes of governing authorities. Of course, it is relatively easy, once legalisation occurs, to commercialise a substance. It is the seemingly unavoidable loss of meaning that comes with commercialisation and commodification that we wish to avoid.

The increased accessibility of medicine that comes with commodifying it, arguably, is good societal progress: it improves lives. Therapies using psychedelics, where legal, are currently offered at prices inaccessible to most [9]. Regarding meaningful use, one can hardly imagine psilocybin pills coming with the traditional drug warning sheet and a booklet describing the ritual use of teonanàcatl by the Aztec in Mexico. Nor will a Western patient expect medicine to be administered ritually – it is these differences in cultural mindset that we must address in the current resurgence. Thus, legalisation will only reveal the existing challenges our society faces.

Solutions

Despite the problems that losing authenticity brings, we can still discuss possible solutions to help preserve authenticity and meaning of psychedelic substances and practices. One obvious solution might be to limit commodification by not making psychedelics legal at all. There is a difference between legalisation and decriminalisation: where decriminalisation removes an authority's power to impose penalties for eg. possession of a substance, legalisation allows a substance to be owned. A substance may be illegal but decriminalised. Decriminalisation, therefore, is more restrictive. In this view, it might be the solution for, at least, safer access and to limit the harms of commercialisation. For example, government-approved distribution sites could be set-up wherein access to psychedelic substances would be restricted. In this way, the impact of commercialisation on authenticity would be lessened.
Despite these points, the overarching

5: By making something widely available, commercialisation may create meaning for a group (collective meaning). The Western world, however, values individuality. Commercialisation replaces meaning created by individuals with collective meaning.

narrative of today's resurgence seems to be that we are headed towards legalisation. Most view decriminalisation as a first step to achieve this. Therefore, if we accept that we are headed toward legalisation, then we should try to prevent the issues discussed by informing policy and law. In other words, if we are aware of these issues, then we have a responsibility, if not to our own society, then to the cultures these issues may harm, to prevent them.

Tightening regulations for commercialising and marketing psychedelic substances may help, at least on a local scale, to limit the effects of commercialisation. One might imagine licensing boards like those regulating alcohol sales, or restrictions on advertising and packaging that apply to tobacco. This may well work to preserve authenticity on a small scale, but those wishing to commercialise psychedelic substances will simply move to places where it is easier to do so. Second, this does not address the problem of commercialising psychedelic practices. The previous point on the "ayahuasca vision quest" illustrates this: putting in place regulations would not prevent "psychedelic tourism". The touristic use of ayahuasca in Peru, for example, is described in [14].
One solution might be to promote a holistic approach, by establishing multidisciplinary research groups that focus less on the substances themselves, and more on the contexts they originated from. MAPS, for example, is an organisation that does this type of work.

Similarly, increasing popular interest on the origins of psychedelics (addressing the mindset described previously) would also contribute to this solution. Importantly, loss of authenticity does not relate only to psychedelics. It can be seen as the outcome of a lack of connection to an established culture. Promoting intercultural dialogue by encouraging cultural exchanges would help preserve authenticity by establishing connections with other cultures.
From an ethical perspective, we have seen the importance of accurate representation. An obvious solution for preserving authenticity, then, is to refer accurately to represented practices. For example, calling a new practice one that is inspired by an indigenous practice is accurate. Perhaps there is also a responsibility to refrain from representation. Respecting the right to exclusive use of certain cultural practices, such as leading a specific ritual, or to the dissemination of indigenous knowledge, reflects this duty to refrain from representation. It may also go further in cultivating respect for different cultures, as the "outsider" agrees to follow the culture's rules.

A more abstract solution to the problem of losing authenticity is a change of perspective. Commercialisation of psychedelics and the threat of cultural harms can be seen as a price to pay, a retribution, for improving medical treatments overall. This is the main solution championed by the current narrative [15, 16]. It is probably true that as medical

research into psychedelic substances evolves, some people will benefit from psychedelic treatment. This, perhaps, is enough to justify some loss of authenticity. Finally, a solution which might not only preserve authenticity, but generate it, would be to create a Western psychedelic culture. With a short history in the 1960s, and popular interest in psychedelics growing today, Western psychedelia is perhaps not completely devoid of authenticity. Compared to cultures which have changed more gradually, however, "the West" (Europe, North America and Australia) lacks a connection to its own culture. Hence, there is an inclination, in the Western world, to create meaning.

Meaning, and an understanding of the world, is expressed through ritual and cultural practices. As an amalgamation of different nations and subcultures, the West can, like any other society, create its own cultures that incorporate more meaning, and specifically, that include psychedelics. Since it is easier to know about the culture one is immersed in than a different one, this is a more promising solution than taking unfamiliar practices from other cultures and adapting them to Westerners' needs.
In creating a new culture, we can use what the West already has, as described above: fifty years of psychedelic use and ideals originating in the 1960s. In addition, Western culture also includes technological advances and medicine as a scientific discipline, as well as the ideal of individuality. Hence, by balancing the therapeutic approaches of the current resurgence and individual meaning-making through ritual, we can create a Western culture that preserves, and promotes, authenticity.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we have discussed the challenges of losing authenticity in the current psychedelic resurgence. We have outlined a history of psychedelics and compared the current resurgence of the movement to that which occurred in the 1960s. We have seen that loss of authenticity happens in two ways: through wrongful cultural appropriation, and through commercialisation and commodification. Finally, we have offered solutions to help preserve authenticity in today's resurgence of the psychedelic movement. Creating a Western psychedelic culture appears to be the most promising. Regarding the dichotomy between the Western utilitarian view of medicine and the traditional supernatural view, we may wish to consider how to balance these views to retain meaning in psychedelic use, while medically benefitting from their properties. We can also investigate the origins of the current psychedelic resurgence: what socio-economic events triggered a renewed interest in psychedelics in the last twenty years? Finally, with the aim of creating our own, new, psychedelic culture, we may ask, "to what extent does the 1960s resurgence of psychedelics and blanket appropriation of both substances and rituals constitute "added value"?"

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